

Soviet Interest in Iran

By Zalmay Khalilzad

The banning of the pro-Soviet Tudeh (Communist) Party and expulsion of 18 Soviet diplomats from Teheran is a significant setback for the Soviet Union. It should not, however, be mistaken as a boon for the United States — for it does not signal an end to Soviet efforts to penetrate and manipulate the Iranian regime.

Although the Iranian revolution owed little to Soviet help or guidance, Moscow took considerable satisfaction from the change — the devastating blow to American interests in the region and the opportunity to project Soviet power in the Persian Gulf. After the fall of the Shah, the Soviet Union sought to increase its economic and military aid to Iran and to support pro-Soviet groups inside the country. Yet, for the most part, Moscow's efforts to gain greater influence in Iran have not worked. Indeed, some of its heavy-handed tactics have been counterproductive.

Why has Moscow failed to achieve its goals? The first reason is that the Iranian ruling elite is ideologically hostile toward both superpowers. Although the United States has been the main target of criticism, the Soviet Union is also disliked and mistrusted. One of the regime's more familiar slogans is "Neither East nor West." Seeking to avoid dependence on its northern neighbor, Iran is improving economic relations with Turkey, Japan, Pakistan, China and India.

Second, Iranians fear Soviet intervention. Although the Russians encouraged close relations with the Khomeini regime, they hoped that the Tudeh Party would eventually inherit the Iranian revolution and they provided the party with financial support and a radio station in Baku, in the Soviet Union. They also supported Tudeh's effort to infiltrate the military, the Revolutionary Guards and the bureaucracy. Indeed, the banning of the party may have resulted from an increase in these efforts in recent months. Moscow also maintained ties with other leftist groups and with ethnic minorities, and there is evidence that Soviet aircraft have dropped supplies to dissident Kurds. The Soviet Union's refusal to accept Iran's renunciation of their 1921 treaty of friendship, which gives Moscow the right to intervene in Iran under some circumstances, further increased Iranian fears — fears that are only heightened by the Soviet presence in Afghanistan.

Third, Moscow is troubled by its inability to contain the Iranian revolution. Recent Soviet policy has been aimed at defeating Iranian efforts to overthrow the Iraqi Government, and the Kremlin has resumed arms supplies to Iraq. Moscow clearly fears that the spread of the Iranian revolution would affect internal Soviet stability by appealing to the rapidly increasing Soviet Moslem population.

Yet, despite these underlying differences and the recent setback, Moscow enjoys considerable advantages over the United States in dealing with Teheran. Geographic proximity insures Soviet interest and military access — and today, for the first time in this century, Iran has no protective alliance with a countervailing power. Iran's break with the West and the substantial Soviet forces across Iran's border in Afghanistan and the Soviet Union give clear advantages to the Russians. Unlike Washington, Moscow maintains a sizeable embassy and a large number of economic advisers in Iran. Teheran also has close political and security ties with several Soviet allies and friends, including Syria, Libya and North Korea.

A major setback

Moscow is likely to persist in using these advantages to influence what it calls "the correlation of forces" in Iran. But whether it succeeds will depend on several factors beyond Moscow's control. The most important is Iran's domestic politics. Although the Khomeini regime has made considerable strides in consolidating its power, it is challenged by several opposition groups and by serious disputes within the ruling party. Domestic conflict is likely to increase after the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's death, leading perhaps to increased Soviet involvement.

Of course, Moscow's opportunities will also depend on the West's response. If Moscow perceived that the West had high stakes in Iran and was able and willing to protect those interests against Soviet threats, it is unlikely that the Kremlin would risk significant intervention. Instead, Moscow is likely to persist in the use of indirect means — including links with Tudeh members and ethnic groups.

Clearly, the United States has little or no leverage in Teheran today, but the Soviet challenge to the West in Iran calls for a long-range strategy to prevent further changes in the balance of power there. As Washington thinks about such a strategy — other regional alliances and military preparations — it would do well to maintain a realistic view of the Soviet Union's

Zalmay Khalilzad is professor of political science at Columbia University and co-author (with Cheryl Benard) of the forthcoming book, "The Government of God: The Rise of Islamic Republicanism in Iran."